

Return to Vail

to be published in the Summer 2009 *Lifeline*

by Dave Olsen

January 3-10 a group of 46 of us enjoyed an outstanding week in Vail, Colorado. The sun, snow and weather were ideal, with the snow being the real deal-maker. The resort had received 109 inches of snow in December—the most December snowfall since 2000—and it continued to snow during our visit.

Our vacation began at Dulles airport, where I had asked everyone to arrive by 7:30 for our 9:35 United Airlines nonstop flight to Denver. A much more reasonable time than we seem to have for so many of our trips. It was noteworthy that we had so many skiers (17) either originating from other airports or arriving by other means. All 29 of us flying from Dulles in fact made it by 7:30, including Roger Hanneman who had booked his own flights—also on United, but with a connection in Kansas City.

We were delightfully surprised at check-in by not being charged any luggage fees. Current United Airlines policies were to pay \$15 for your first bag and \$25 for your second checked bag (with skis and a boot bag together counting as just one bag). However, our tickets were apparently considered as having been purchased back in May when our tour broker, Dan Ellis of Winter Ski and Sport, had obtained the seats. And there were no luggage fees in effect back then.

Our flight departed right on time and went without a hitch. Our entertainment system offered a selection of films including *Bottle Shock* (about the nascent California wine industry circa 1976), *City of Ember*, *The Longshots*, and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2*. We touched down in Denver shortly ahead of our scheduled 11:33am arrival time (as the Captain had said early on, "This 757 goes really, really fast.").

In Denver we were greeted by Sue Ma and Dick Lamb from Cleveland; their son Bob Lamb and his wife Krystina from Phoenix; Sheryl Walsh, who had flown in from Boston a day early; Denise Ridgway and Larita Killian arriving separately from Indianapolis; and Dottie Shaw from Seattle. We also met

six of our seven new members from the Montreal area: Richard Huot, Lucie Viau, Jean-François "JF" Lacroix, and Jean-Paul "JP" St. Pierre, who had flown in a day early; and Sylvain Sergerie and Nathalie Paquin. The seventh member of our Canadian contingent was to arrive a day late. Carmel Roche, originating from Fort Lauderdale, had missed her Atlanta connection on Airtran and was expected to arrive at 2:40pm, so we had to depart without her, leaving her with instructions (a message on her cell phone) for the Colorado Mountain Express door-to-door shuttle service.

Unfortunately it took an entire hour and a half to get all our luggage and skis, but we were loading the bus by 1:00pm and were on our way about 20 minutes later. A half hour later we arrived for the customary provisioning stop at the Applejacks/King Sooper strip mall on the outskirts of Denver where we loaded up on food, beverage, and snacks for the ride to Vail and the following week in our condos. En route to Vail we made a 5-minute stop at Silverthorne to pick up the skis that Christina Anderson, Roger Hanneman and I had left with club member Jay Weides in December. Upon our arrival at Vail Spa Condos we were rushed into the conference room for their modest little welcome reception, but were disheartened by the bum's rush we were afforded, as they discouraged us from making even a quick stop in our rooms to drop off perishables. On the bright side, the beer & wine they furnished went well with the follow-on pizza party that was hosted by the club. We were pleased that Carmel arrived safe & sound before the pizza was gone! After a quick distribution of lift tickets and a review of a few logistics for the week, we settled into our condos and laid out our trappings for the next morning.

Sunday morning a large contingent headed out to the convenient shuttle-bus stop just outside Vail Spa, across the street in front of the Marriott Hotel, and hopped onto the bus to take us to Golden Peak at the far end of the village, just steps from the Riva Bahn Express Lift. By the time we got to the top of the Northwoods Express Lift for our first run, our little group consisted of John White, Al Smuzynski, Larry Powers, Bob Chatman, Roger DeCesare, Peter "Pierre" Morris, Roger Hanneman, Steve Peirce, Bill Check, Christina, Nina Litton, Peter Porton, and Jay (who had joined us for the day). After a quick run down the Northstar trail (a groomed black run), we split into two groups with Jay providing expert guiding into the back bowls and Blue Sky Basin, while I took a smaller group for some more groomers on the

front side followed by a stop at the Nastar course. Christina, Roger, and Steve earned Silver medals. I squeaked by with a Gold medal, with Richard and JF — who we ran into at the course — earning more solid Golds (i.e., they both beat me hands-down!). After lunch our group also headed to Blue Sky Basin to finish the day.

Monday morning on the way out to ski we met Dominique Delage who completed our Canadian group. A little background here is interesting: Richard, the group's organizer, ran into club members Doug Hackett and Cheryl Bohn in Munich in 2002 after the club's trip to Cortina. The group skis together each winter and since then had been following the club's trips on our website. They tried without success to get on last-winter's Steamboat trip, but this time everything worked out including the country-to-country transfer of funds directly into the club's bank account to pay for them all, coordinated by JF who works at a bank. Unfortunately they took a big hit on the exchange rate when the US dollar gained substantially just before they made their payments.

Monday started off partly cloudy but it began snowing in the afternoon with various predictions of modest to substantial snowfall. Tuesday morning we awoke to reports of 5 inches of new snow. First tracks on the groomed runs were sweet, but the better powder was on the day-old runs where the fresh snow hadn't been packed down by the overnight grooming. The bowls were a true pleasure, with it seeming closer to a foot of powder in some areas. It continued to snow moderately throughout the day, boding well for the next day. Indeed, Wednesday morning's snow report claimed 11 inches of snowfall in the preceding 24 hours, and the TV reported that Vail Pass was closed, with snow expected to continue throughout the day - another powder day in store! And indeed it was, with about 6 inches on the freshly groomed trails and the reported 11 inches and more on the ungroomed trails. Skiing in Blue Sky Basin we encountered more than a foot everywhere with drifts that were easily three times as much. A true powder day!

Wednesday night 37 of us enjoyed the fantastic group dinner that Sheryl arranged for us at Up The Creek restaurant in Vail Village—the same venue that she had set up for us on the 2007 Vail trip (don't mess with success!). The Pan Roasted Ruby Red Trout, Kurabota Pork Loin and Whole Roasted

Chicken together were a 36-to-1 favorite over the fourth selection of Braised Short Ribs.

Thursday a sizeable contingent took the express bus to Beaver Creek to sample the resort for a day. The snow might have been better back at Vail with the morning e-mail report claiming 6 inches, but the 2 inches reported for Beaver Creek freshened things up a bit for us. While there we tried their Nastar course with Golds going to Dave and Richard and Silvers to Christina, Bob C, Roger H, Nina and Steve P. Before heading back to Vail we enjoyed some Margaritas on the patio outside McCoy's Café and Bar. Bill Check unfortunately had to head home early due to a worsening situation with some upper respiratory issues. That evening we were hosted to a generous Après Ski Party by Vail Resorts. They consider us one of their "White Carpet Clubs" that visits their resorts year after year. The hors d'oeuvres & libations were their way to recognize our loyalty. That evening a popular pastime was to watch Florida and Oklahoma in the BCS title game.

Friday morning we had another 5 inches of new powder and it snowed most of the day. One last venture to the Nastar course produced Silvers for Christina, Roger H and Steve, and Golds for Richard, JF and me.

Saturday morning came all too soon—especially considering the morning e-mail reporting yet another 8 inches of freshies. Our bus arrived as scheduled just before 9:00 and after a quick load (everything fit!) we were on the road by 9:15. Check-in at DEN went smoothly for the most part, except for a missing boot bag that Jerry and Valerie DeRosa had failed to carry in from the bus. Fortunately, it turned up at airport security/lost & found and all was well, with everyone checked in by noon for our scheduled 2:54pm nonstop flight back to Dulles. Once again, no luggage fees to pay—yeah! We landed about 15 minutes before our scheduled 8:05pm arrival time but were worried when many of our skis didn't show up. Turns out they were stacked on the floor in another area, having arrived on an earlier flight. Whew! Ernie Becking was greeted by his wife Margaret, and Pierre by his wife Dani and their two youngsters.

Some highlights from the trip critiques:

Nina really enjoyed Jay's tour of Blue Sky Basin and said that "more of that would have been great!"

Lucie suffered from Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) symptoms the first couple of days, this being her first time at high altitudes. She told Richard that this time her headaches were real!

Richard had fun skiing China Bowl — his first venture into deep powder, and skiing the Birds of Prey downhill course at Beaver Creek on hard-pack snow ("these guys are crazy"). But he complained of "too many headaches" (Lucie's...).

Roger DeCesare enjoyed skiing with his brother Richard who joined him from Denver, and with his condo-mate Mike Muse.

Friday afternoon Denise, April Gannon and Laurie Hammond had a lot of fun snow tubing at the Adventure Ridge Fun Park near the top of the Eagle Bahn Gondola.

On Wednesday, Sheryl and April "had a blast" skiing Beaver Creek with a snowcat operator. "He took us down several fresh powder runs that no one else seemed to know about."

Mitch Grimes, our only non-skier, hiked Vail extensively, logging as much as 9 miles one day!

Pierre (our Aussie contingent) described the "...big and totally unexpected air" that he took on his first run of the day on the Northwoods trail. "When I looked around there was another bloke who'd fallen and he said, 'Dude, I just did that too.'"

Carmel enjoyed skiing with April, Beth Nicholson, and her condo-mates Clare & Roger DeCesare, Mike Muse, Pierre, and Larita. "Pierre and Mike were comedians - I don't think we ever turned on the TV. The camaraderie & friendship were amazing."

Roger & Clare enjoyed the amenities at Beaver Creek including the escalators and the hot chocolate served at the top of the Centennial Express Lift.

Lauren Pontius spent part of her day off from skiing with her parents, Ron and Chae-Im, planning her college schedule.

John was intrigued that he wound up in the same condo unit as on our 2007 trip. He also enjoyed the couple of great powder days we had, although he "...had a face plant on my first run down the hill—so much for my CMH Heli-Ski training, although I did use the recovery techniques I learned to search for my lost skis and getting back into my skis."

Valerie & Jerry praised the BBQ at Mo's; the trout at Blu's; and their skiing on Thursday at Beaver Creek ("the best"). Gail and Bill Memler also visited Mo's a time or two.

Bob & Krystina "...had a great time & really learned a lot from the 3-day lessons."

"No PSC member had their derrier exposed while riding the lift" (anonymous) ... in reference to the unfortunate gent who had dangled pantsless from Vail's Skyline Express Lift on New Year's Day, as widely reported in the media.

Helen Fiske was dismayed that her condo (Ernie, Liz Groszer, Helen and John) "...had leftover alcohol! Even Larry Powers didn't want our extra beer."

Larry countered with several reasons for refusing the offer, primary amongst them being that "It wasn't Belgian beer!"

Liz posed the question, "How many PSC members does it take to turn on the shower in Unit 317? Answer: Four, plus the Vail Spa employee who finally solved the mystery made it five!"

"Pierre proved that women do not have a monopoly on shopping." (Anonymous)

"Sheryl's oxygen-generating machine sucked all the O₂ out of the room - poor Denise." (Anonymous)

Dottie provided that "Larry Bedell and I were riding up on a chair with the bar down and as we approached the top, the lift operator slowed the chair and it took us a few seconds to realize we left the bar down. *It was Larry's fault.*"

Overheard: "This mountain has beat me!" (offered anonymously, so the remark will not be attributed, either ...)

Some plusses for Vail Spa:

Very spacious and nice

Great location

Front desk was very responsive - quickly provided hair dryer & TV for room.

Maintenance was very responsive - replaced refrigerator for us

...and a few minuses:

WiFi was weak and intermittent. (At least it was free, and there were two computers for everyone to use in the lobby, also free of charge.)

It would have been nice to have humidifiers in the rooms.

There shouldn't be any bunk beds in the condos. (Unexpectedly, we got stuck with one bedroom that had just a bunk bed in it. My apologies to Bill Check and Al)

Other plusses:

Departure time was great - not having to be at the airport at 5am

Great weather - sun & snow conditions - wow!

Loved the pizza on Saturday night & the après ski party was terrific!

##